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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the rationale and procedures used in identifying and retraining illiterate or semiliterate high school students in an alternative high school. The program focused on decoding skills taught through SRA materials in a reading skills laboratory. Because many of the students had had many years of unsuccessful remedial reading instruction, the program attempted to retrain them, as though they had never previously tried to learn to read. After one year, 39 of the 59 students who attended the course had completed the decoding phase and were able to read all of the spelling patterns covered by the SRA series. All but one of the students advanced at least two levels in the SRA series and were evaluated by teachers as having considerably improved their decoding skills. (AA)

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A READING RETRAINING PROGRAM FOR ILLITERATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Basic Reading Instruction: High School/Adult

CS002902

I Introduction

The following paper reports on a basic reading skills retraining program for illiterate and marginally literate high school students who attended the Parkway Program in Philadelphia during the 1972-73 school year. The rate and degree of increase of reading proficiency exceeded all anticipation. For this reason it is felt that a description of the course, the results achieved and observations of student attitudes might be of value to others impementing reading skills programs for similar high school students.

The Parkway Program is the earliest and perhaps best known alternative high school without walls in this country. At the time referred to, it was composed of 800 students in four units of 200 each. Students were admitted on a voluntary basis from a wide variety of backgrounds and without regard to competence in basic skills. The open, personalized atmosphere of Parkway placed great reliance on student responsibility and the program tried to respond very sensitively to student educational needs. Thus, the inability of many students to read well represented a major problem to be solved.

II Goals and Main Features of the Program

After consideration of all the reading and language needs of Parkway students and the school's resources for meeting them, a very limited and carefully delineated program addressing itself to the decoding deficiencies of illiterate or marginally literate students was designed. It would organize special classes in a reading skills laboratory for those students who could not decode English well enough to understand a passage representative of a high school text. Students with only problems of comprehending materials--of interpreting, of redefining, of making assumptions about what had been read--would be helped in the context of their other courses or later on in the reading laboratory if resources allowed.

Since the aim of the program was limited to meeting the needs of students with decoding difficulties, a method had to be devised to find only those particular students in the Parkway student body. Once found, it was then necessary to develop a classroom program for those students that would address itself principally to meeting their decoding needs. It was also agreed that since many of the students had had years of remedial reading instruction, it was advisable not to repeat any methods of teaching reading that had previously failed them. Thus, all students were to start in a new program as beginners and to be retrained as though they had never tried to learn to read previously. A programed, spelling -sound pattern method was to be selected. Students would be moved through the materials as fast as accuracy in decoding would permit.

The decision was made to organize small classes of homogeneously grouped students in the reading skills laboratory rather than to set up an individualized tutorial program. Homogeneous groups, each meeting very similar student needs, could be established because the goal was limited to the systematic improvement of decoding skills. Teachers also reasoned that students would feel less pressured and lonely in a group situation and would be able to learn from and help one another. The financial advantages of this arrangement over the one-to-one pupil-teacher ratio were also obvious.

III Implementing the Program

1. Selection and Training of Staff

Aside from a consultant (this writer) to organize and lead the program, financial considerations did not permit the hiring of any additionally trained reading teachers for the reading skills laboratory. Members of the existing Parkway staff had, therefore, to be recruited and organized to use part of their time to teach reading. Five English teachers volunteered to implement the reading program--to coordinate their efforts and to follow the prescribed methods of retraining students in

decoding skills. These teachers were given ten days of intensive training (with pay) during the summer of 1972 to prepare them for the program beginning with the fall semester. Training sessions were continued throughout the year.

2. Selection and Assignment of Students

Identifying the students with decoding deficiencies (as against those who could read but who were unable to comprehend language) presented a challenge. This was met by having every one of the 800 Parkway students, 200 in each of four units, read orally three paragraphs from Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington. These paragraphs were selected by the Parkway staff as generally representative of a reading level they thought necessary for competence in reading. They also contained words, phrases and sentences representing the full range of decoding challenges from easy to difficult. A record was kept of every decoding error made by every student as well as any failure to understand any of the content. Each student was then classified and placed into one of four categories:

I. Fluent, accurate readers who understood what they had read.

II Readers who made occasional decoding errors but who were able, nevertheless, to understand almost all they had read.

III Readers who made so many decoding errors or who had to struggle so much to figure out the sounds of spellings that they could not understand the meaning of the passage--marginal literates.

IV Illiterates or those who could not decode the most basic, frequently used spelling patterns.

Of the 800 Parkway students tested, 80 (or 10%) were placed in Categories III and IV. Due to various difficulties only 59 of the 80 were finally assigned to and actually attended the Reading Skills Laboratory course. 42 of the 59 students had been placed

in Category III and 17 were in Category IV. All 59 students were excused from attending any classes that conflicted in time with the reading course. Every student readily accepted the assignment and many of them expressed enthusiasm over having their reading needs cared for. Surprisingly, many of the students of Category II requested to be assigned to the course to improve their reading.

3. The Program and Selection of Materials

Because students in the laboratory course were selected to be retrained in decoding skills, the program had to start at the most elementary level--with simple spelling patterns that illustrated a one-to-one correspondence between spelling and sound--the same as pupils might have at the beginning of learning to read. The SRA Basic Reading Series was selected for use in the course and provided the basic textual materials. Although the SRA Series was a basal series for much younger pupils, it not only had the sequenced spelling patterns needed but it also had a word attack method different from any the students had met before. Students were told that they were starting reading anew and they were asked to ignore the fact that some of the content and illustrations were designed for pupils much younger than they were. Initially a few students questioned the use of such materials, but in a few days they became involved in study and the question was forgotten.

The SRA Series is programed to present decoding challenges from simple, regular, frequently used spelling-sound patterns to complex, more infrequently used patterns. The Series is sequenced by levels from A to F. Students began the series at Level A if they had been placed in Category IV of the placement test and in Level B if they were in Category III or marginally literate. Beginning at this elemental level assured that students would master all the principal spelling patterns of English which are included in Level F of the Series.

The students met in homogeneous groups of 10 to 15 for an hour a day, five days a week for one school year. The course was very structured and teacher directed--in contrast with most of the classes in the Parkway Program. The principal aim in each class was to give students a new basis for figuring out words by seeing them in the context of sequenced, spelling-sound patterns. The students read aloud each day to the teacher as well as to one another. Mistakes were corrected immediately in order to help in achieving complete accuracy in oral reading. Additional reading materials with a similar sequence of word patterns were made available to the students.

Students began a second phase of the laboratory course when they completed Level F of the SRA Series--which meant that they had mastered decoding and were able to figure out independently the new words. In this phase they were given a variety of "easy to read" books, stories and plays, magazines and newspapers to practice their newly acquired decoding skills and to expand their reading vocabularies. The emphasis in this phase was also on oral reading but now some time was taken to discuss and to analyse the content.

IV Results of the Reading Laboratory Course

The results of the Reading Laboratory Course can be best seen in the following outline form. In the outline, "completing a level" means that the student was able to decode accurately (read aloud) the poems and stories of that level in the SRA Basic Reading Series.

59 students (7.4% of Parkway students) attended the Reading Skills Course.

17 students of Category IV (illiterates) took the course.

11 attended regularly.

6 completed Level F of the SRA Series.

5 completed Level E of the SRA Series.

6 attended irregularly.

3 completed Level E of the SRA Series.

1 completed Level D (was admitted in January).

2 completed Level C (1 was admitted in January).

42 students of Category III (marginally literate) took the course

32 attended regularly.

27 completed Level F of the SRA Series.

21 went on ~~the~~ to Phase 2 of the course.

5 completed Level E of the SRA Series (3 were admitted in January).

10 students attended irregularly.

6 completed Level F of the SRA Series.

2 went on to Phase 2 of the course.

4 completed Level D of the SRA Series (1 was admitted in January; 2 quit school in January).

Thus, 39 of the 59 students who attended the Reading Laboratory Course completed the decoding phase of the program and were able to read all the spelling patterns covered by the SRA Series. 23 of the students went on to a second phase of the course in which they were exercising their skills on "easy to read" literature. 13 additional students reached the final level of the SRA Series. All but one of the students in the course advanced at least two levels in the SRA Series and were evaluated by teachers as having very considerably improved in their decoding skills.

V. Conclusions and Observations

A. On Student Progress in Decoding Skills

1. All but one of the students improved markedly in decoding skills--much more than any of the teachers expected they could. Many students, including some who attended class irregularly, made spectacular gains.
2. The oral test used at the beginning of the course succeeded well in finding the students with decoding difficulties. Every student beginning the course made frequent mistakes in reading aloud the first two levels of the SRA Series which include only simple consonant-vowel-consonant patterns.
3. Both the tests and the student class work revealed that "guessing" words by using the technique of context clues in conjuction with phonic rules was the greatest handicap to accurate decoding. Students showed the greatest confusion over decoding the vowel letters in words, and had especially great difficulty in keeping from guessing them.

B. On Student Attitudes

1. Senior high school students were very willing to start their reading training anew even though the materials used were intended for much younger, beginning pupils. There was little evidence of self-consciousness over reading an elementary text. Visitors were not permitted in the classroom until the end of the year when a group of school administrators were invited. Somewhat to the surprise of teachers, the students were very eager to show their progress and did so with obvious pleasure.
2. An esprit de corps and feeling of camaraderie developed in each class as teachers and students worked together to correct and help in oral reading. Every student was eager to be listened to and corrected as needed.
3. Many of the students requested that a similar skills course be established for spelling and writing.

4. The morale of the students seemed to be directly proportional to their success in mastering the increasingly difficult levels of the SRA Series. The content of what they were reading seemed to matter very little to them--except perhaps that it was in understandable English. Some students themselves stated the fact very well by saying, "I don't care what you want me to read as long as I'm getting ahead." Not only the programing but also the sequencing by very small, specific steps always gave students an easy measure of their progress as well as a clear goal for the next step in continuing it.

C. On Teaching the Program

1. Initially teachers had difficulty restricting themselves to the specific goal of improving decoding skills. Without being conscious of it, teachers would attend to the needs of students in other aspects of the language arts. Only gradually were they able to ignore other needs and concentrate on a single objective that required all the time allotted to it.
2. Teachers also had an initial difficulty in using consistently only the word attack method prescribed in the SRA Series. Again, without knowing it, teachers would use context clues and older phonic methods that contradicted the techniques agreed upon in the program. Only when they saw evidence of how their own inconsistency and confusion was reflected in the confusion of students were they able to stop it.
3. Teachers as well as students were very enthusiastic about a structured program with clear, very specific goals--even though this was in contrast to the mode in other Parkway courses.